

Death On Wheels

Melanie McNamara

Hank raced down the sidewalk, his arms pumping furiously, his lungs laboring. He grinned as he whizzed past three blonde coeds, watching them scatter like a herd of long-legged gazelles startled by the sudden appearance of a hungry lion at their waterhole.

He looked back briefly when he reached the door, and all three girls were smiling benignly at him. Of course they would not be mad at him. He gritted his teeth in annoyance, wishing he could have pissed at least one of them off.

If he had been a football player, or even a pencil-necked nerd, they would have been mad. They would have yelled at him, cussed him out, or maybe even flipped him off. Anyone else would have angered them beyond belief zipping through them like that. But not him.

No, him they would never be angry at. They would pinch off their angry words, stay their gestures and recriminations—they would be as saints, but only for him, and frankly, it pissed him off.

Gritting his teeth, he yanked open the door to the computer lab and stormed inside, not waiting to hold the door open for them. No, they would be too grateful. He turned his back on them and headed for the computer lab room.

He was still gritting his teeth when he reached the computer lab, but it was more now from expectation than anger.

Hey, Hank, the lab assistant greeted him lazily as he opened the door.

Hey, Darlies, Hank returned the greeting with some surprise. What are you doing in the lab on a Friday afternoon?

Darlies stretched lankily, propping his feet up on the desk and heaved a sigh. Punishment, my friend, the big man lamented in a woeful tone. Dey is allus gettin de black men to do all de white boyz work. Massah sez I got to be doin work on

de weekend ifn I wanna be keepin dis job. An de college sez I got to be workin ifn I wanna be stayin in school.

Hank chuckled, amused at Darlies' slave dialect. Okay, okay, he said. I just wondered if Darlies the Dude had become Darlies the Dateless.

Oh, the lovely ladies I have disappointed for this weekend, the black man sighed. Lagenia, Kia, Heather, Lisa, Brenda—

There are only three days in a weekend, Hank pointed out. And only *two* nights, he added.

Ah, Darlies winked at Hank. The things I could teach you, my boy.

I'm sure you would, if I weren't in such a hurry, Hank said pointedly.

Darlies made a quick gesture of supplication, bowing his head low to the desk.

Ise sorry, massah. Yessir, dis heres one sorry black boy, he droned. Ise terrible sorry, massah. Pleeze don beat me, massah.

Hank shook his head in laughter. He could never be angry at Darlies. Of all the people he knew on campus, and for that matter, of most of the people he knew elsewhere, he was most comfortable around Darlies.

Darlies flipped the starter disk through the air, and Hank caught it neatly, almost reverently. The disk was his key to a completely different world.

Hey, don't spend so long in there today, Darlies called after Hank's disappearing back. The lab closes at 5 tonight!

Hank barely heard him, already off in his own private world. He settled down in front of his usual terminal and expertly popped the disk in, flexing his fingers while he waited impatiently for the busy light on the disk drive to go from red to green.

Finally, the angry red glow faded to a quiet green, and Hank keyed in his username, then his password. Again, there was a pause, though this one much shorter than the first. The drive made a short, grating noise, and then the cursor flashed twice, just like Hank knew it would.

It blinked once more, this time slower, and a message suddenly popped up on the screen:

GREETINGS, MURIK, HANK L.

LAST INTERACTIVE LOG IN: Oct. 29, 1992

\$

His last log in had been yesterday, but that was no surprise. He was in the lab every day on the VAX system. The dollar prompt was asking him what command he chose to give it. He almost grinned. If only the computer were human; it would never have to ask. With practiced ease, he keyed in his command.

\$ Telnet

There was a blink and a pause, and then a new prompt flashed on the screen:

TEL>

He answered with the code he knew by heart, the one that would actually get him through the door to a world he so desperately wanted to be a part of.

TEL>connect culebra.uccs.edu 2525

There was another pause, and Hank waited anxiously. Suppose someone had changed the code? Suppose they had shut down the line? Suppose—

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED:

Welcome to the Coffee Shop!

Not wasting any time, Hank typed in his name identifier. The minute his connection had been successfully established, the others on the line knew someone from his terminal had logged in. Now, it was just a number, but once he identified himself, others would recognize him, and then....

PIANO MAN SAYS HEY, FLASH! HOWS IT GOING?

WET VETTE SAYS HI FLASH!

JOE COOL PLAYS IT COOL AND SAYS NOTHING

ANGEL SAYS FLASH! *KISS*

JESTER SAYS WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?

Hank drank up their responses, then thought about Jester's question.

FLASH SAYS GAZELLES!

Hank watched the screen intently as delayed greetings and reactions of confusion to his statement about gazelles flashed past. He enjoyed the camaraderie the others tossed at him, but he was waiting for one in particular....

JESTER SAYS GAZELLES?

MAJIKTHISE SAYS HI, FLASH

THE MASKED BANDIT WAVES AT FLASH

8 BALL SAYS WHATS THIS ABOUT GAZELLES,
FLASH?

ROGUE SAYS HI FLASH GREAT TO SEE YOU AGAIN.

That was it! Rogue was on line tonight. Flushing slightly at her greeting, Hank ignored the statements about gazelles and the other greetings and typed in a personal to Rogue.

/p HEY MADDIE: WHATS UP?

He didn't realize he was holding his breath waiting for her reply until his lungs protested, making him gasp for air.

/p HIYA, HANK. SHALL WE SWITCH CHANNELS?

/p SOUNDS GOOD TO ME. 16?

He switched channels to 16 to talk with Madeline Cowen, also known as Maddie, alias Rogue.

HEY HANK, I GOTTA MAKE THIS QUICK. I STILL HAVE TO GET MY COSTUME TOGETHER.

SO YOURE STILL COMING? he asked somewhat anxiously.

WOULD NOT MISS IT FOR THE WORLD. AM I STILL INVITED?

ALWAYS, Hank typed.

I HAVE DIRECTIONS. I WILL BE THERE. HOW WILL I KNOW YOU?

Hank shifted uncomfortably. He had known this problem would arise. He gave it a few minutes of thought, then typed in his answer.

I WILL BE IN A COSTUME I CALL DEATH ON WHEELS.

OOH, SOUNDS JUST LIKE A MAN.

(LAUGH) AND WHAT WILL YOU BE WEARING? I PERSONALLY THINK YOU WOULD LOOK GOOD AS A NUDIST.

(LAUGH) THANKS, HANK. IT WOULD BE A CHEAP COSTUME. I WILL BE IN A COSTUME I CALL...NICE ASS.

WOW! I CANT WAIT TO SEE IT!

YOU JUST WAIT. SEE YOU AT MIDNIGHT?

MIDNIGHT, Hank confirmed.

With her usual inattention to niceties, Maddie broke the connection. Hank sat motionless in front of the screen, thinking about the costume party tomorrow night and wondering. Then he switched channels back to the public line.

VIPER SAYS GLAD TO SEE YOU BACK, FLASH
STORMSHADOW AND WET VETTE WAVE AT
FLASH.

JESTER SAYS SO TELL ME ABOUT THESE
GAZELLES....

Hank fidgeted nervously in front of the mirror, adjusting his cape and hood just right, hoping they would stay just right on the way over to the Student Union Center. The brisk October breeze would not be kind to his attempt at creativity.

He glanced at the clock, hoping that more than a minute had gone by since he had last looked, but it was still only 11:34. It usually took him about 5 minutes to get to the student U, but if he took his time about it...well, he might as well leave now. Maybe Maddie would be early.

He made his way as slowly as he could, but it still only took him about 8 minutes. The Student U was fairly crowded, and the party was in full swing when he got there. He scanned the crowd, hoping to see Maddie.

Hey Hank, a gypsy from his accounting class greeted him. Hank winced beneath his hood. He waved his scythe menacingly, but the gypsy merely laughed self-consciously and moved on.

Dammit, everyone knew who this spector of Death was. They all saw through his costume immediately. But couldn't they at least *pretend* and give him *some* anonymity?

Gritting his teeth, Hank approached the punch bowl and refreshment table. Under the pretense of enjoying a particularly mushy pumpkin cookie, he scanned the room for someone he could identify as Maddie.

Several punks danced in one corner, and Hank couldn't be sure if they were in costume, or if they had just decided that the Halloween party would be a good one to crash.

Two pirates conversed as they ladled punch into their paper dixie cups; Batman danced with a girl in a gorilla suit—at least Hank assumed it was a girl from the way Batman was holding her; a bum, a ghost in a sheet, a mummy, and another spector of Death all danced together; a donkey clomped around on the dance floor, looking ludicrous as the people within bumped and swayed into others; a scarecrow stood in the doorway, perhaps looking for someone, perhaps just blind behind the pillowcase (with its crooked eyeholes) that served as a mask.

Could that be Maddie? Had she been kidding when shesaid something about the Nice Ass? Maybe her pants had no seat. Or maybe she was referring to the fact that she would

feel like an ass in the costume.

Should he go to her? Should he wait and watch? Maybe he should have never invited her in the first place. Surely she would turn him down. But there was only one way to find out.

Carefully setting down his punch, he started across the crowded dance floor towards the seductive scarecrow. She didn't seem to see him coming—wait, now she was looking toward him. He tentatively lifted a hand, as if to catch her attention.

Just then, the donky blundered into him, knocking him slightly off balance and blocking his view.

Hey, get your ass out of...my...face.... He trailed off. The donkey paused expectantly, eyes staring out at him from deep within the false donkeyhead.

Nice ass, Maddie, he said quietly, forgetting the scarecrow.

The donkeyhead bobbed slightly in acknowledgement. That's a nice set of wheels, Death, came a somewhat muffled voice.

A silence descended that had nothing to do with the fact that the band had paused to switch numbers. Hank cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly, and Maddie laughed a laugh that curiously sounded nothing like the braying of a donkey.

Death on Wheels, she giggled. That's good. Of all the things I had pictured, this was not one of them. She clumsily motioned with one misshaped hoof.

Was she mad? Surely she was disappointed. What would she say? What would she do?

The band started in on a new number, this one louder than the first.

It's kind of stuffy in here! Maddie yelled. Can we go outside?

Hank nodded dumbly, realizing that she at least had the heart to let him down gently, with no witnesses. He turned slowly and made his way through the doors, a path clearing ostentatiously for him.

The cool October breeze was a welcome relief, and though the music was still audible through the open windows of the Student U, it was little more than background noise at the moment.

Oh, this feels much better. Maddie had taken off her donkeyhead and was shaking out her long chestnut hair. Hank

couldn't tell what color her eyes were in the dark, but they were sparkling in the streetlight that illuminated the sidewalk.

Hank decided to follow suit and pushed back the hood of his grim-reaper costume, propping his scythe up against his shoulder.

Who's the back of your costume? he asked to fill the silence.

Oh, it's just stuffed and mounted on skates, Maddie replied. She paused. I've been looking forward to meeting you for a long time, Flash.

Not as long as I've waited to meet Rogue, Hank admitted. I'm not what you...expected, am I, he asked, his voice thick. He waited for her to reject him.

Maddie smiled comfortingly, but with a trace of pity. You're a legend with everyone at Kent State.

Hank noticed without seeming to how she avoided the question.

Maddie nodded. Everyone talks about Flash—you're a hit! We all love your wit and charm. She was babbling now, but her gaze shifted left and right nervously. The donkey looked ready to bolt.

Well, I think I should get back. I'm supposed to meet Batwoman and Viper, too. She paused, her body already turning to head back inside. Are you...coming back?

It sounded like she already knew the answer, but Hank shook his head anyway. I've got another party to go to. I just checked in to see my fellow VAX junkies. It was a forced lie, and she probably knew it. He wished he hadn't said it.

What are you going to tell the others at Kent? he asked. It was a foolish question, and he didn't know why he had asked it.

Just that I met the great Flash, and found he was as witty in real life as he is on the screen. Maddie grinned at him, as if he would be consoled by what she had said. He forced himself not to scream at her I don't need your pity! Instead, he offered a little wave goodbye.

Have fun at the party, he offered, but she was already turning to go back inside, dragging the donkey ass behind her. Hank felt as if he should be wearing the donkey costume so he could walk away with his tail between his legs.

Instead, he turned his wheelchair and headed back to the dorm.